CHAPTER 37

Mike Mansfield's Senate: The Vietnam Years

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Mr. President, on the last day of Mike Mansfield's service in the United States Senate, he arose to recall the many great events that had taken place during his sixteen years as Majority Leader. Quite naturally, among the issues that loomed the largest in his memory was the war in Vietnam, which "first supported by the nation and then denounced by the nation, was finally brought to an end by the President under the persistent pressure of the Senate." This was a bittersweet accomplishment for Mansfield. As a young congressman in 1945, he had warned that "with the exception of Japan, our military business has ended in the Far East, and the best procedure for us to follow would be to let the countries in that part of the world settle their own internal difficulties." But, Mr. President, his warnings went unheeded over the next three decades, and the United States stumbled into the tragic war he had wanted to avoid.[1]

There were many senators who took an active role, either for or against the war in Vietnam. They made many eloquent speeches and cast many courageous votes. One thinks of J. William Fulbright, Richard Russell, Wayne Morse, Henry Jackson, Frank Church, John Sherman Cooper, George McGovern, George Aiken, and so many more who fought this war verbally and tactically in the committee rooms and on the Senate floor. Not everyone agreed with Mike Mansfield about Vietnam—I had my differences with him over our policies there—but no senator doubted his wisdom, expertise, and strong sense of principle on matters relating to foreign policy in general and Southeast Asia in particular. No other senator devoted so much of his attention over so long a time to Vietnam; no one visited that country more often, had more contact with its leaders, and had more respect from all sides of the fierce debate that followed than did Mike Mansfield. His words and his activities offer us a road map through the Vietnam maze. My remarks today owe a debt to a very fine collection of Senator Mansfield's speeches, *Hon. Politician: Mike Mansfield of Montana,* edited by Louis Baldwin. I recommend this volume to all those interested in the Senate's role in the Vietnam War.

Knowledgeable about Chinese history and contemporary life, Representative Mike Mansfield visited China in 1944 on a mission for President Roosevelt. *Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library/University of Montana*

During an earlier address in my continuing series on the history of the United States Senate, I discussed the Senate and a bipartisan foreign policy during the 1950's. At the time, I referred to the roots of American involvement in Indochina during the time of the Dienbienphu crisis in 1954; the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization; and the creation of Laos, Cambodia, and North and South Vietnam out of the former French colony. I pointed out that warnings from congressional Democratic leaders had persuaded President Eisenhower not to become militarily involved in Vietnam unless supported by our European allies—a support that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles discovered was not forthcoming. In retrospect, President Eisenhower receives high marks for avoiding American military participation in Vietnam, although his administration provided the economic and military aid that enabled the new government of Ngo Dinh Diem to become established in South Vietnam and that tied the United States to that regime with fateful consequences.

Senator Mansfield was strongly influenced by earlier American actions in China and Korea. As a young marine, he had visited China in 1922; he had studied and taught about China at Montana State University; and he had visited China as President Roosevelt's special representative in 1944. Mansfield had few illusions over the strength or ability of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government and was not surprised when Chiang's government collapsed in 1949 and the Nationalists fled to the island of For-

mosa. When a bitter debate developed in the United States over "Who Lost China?" Mansfield supported the policies of President Harry Truman and his beleaguered secretary of state, Dean Acheson. Opponents of Truman's policies, most notably Wisconsin's Joe McCarthy, tried to smear anyone who had the slightest doubt about Chiang as somehow being procommunist, and labeled the Montana congressman as China Mike. Montana voters were not convinced and elected Mike Mansfield to the Senate after a bitter and hard-fought campaign in 1952. In that campaign, he defeated incumbent Zales Ecton by a margin of 6,000 votes out of 360,000 cast. Still, this experience long affected him deeply, and it was many years before he renewed his interests in American relations with China. Similarly, Mansfield was shaped by his observations of the Korean War—which involved American troops on the mainland of Asia, which lingered on longer than anyone had expected, which affected American public opinion, and which darkened the final years of the Truman administration.

As a senator, Mike Mansfield returned to Asia, although now the doors of China were closed to him. He toured extensively throughout Southeast Asia, including the capitals of what would later become Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam after the collapse of the French colonial effort in Indochina. He was also a member of the American delegation to the Geneva Conference that divided Indochina and witnessed the birth of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, known as SEATO. Mansfield was visiting Hanoi at the very time the French evacuated that city. Because he knew the region, its history, and its leaders so intimately, Mansfield was dubious when the Eisenhower administration moved to establish an American role in Southeast Asia. In July 1954, Mansfield delivered a prophetic warning in the Senate:

> I do not know whether the President himself ever seriously considered committing this nation to an armed involvement in Indochina. Nevertheless, the air around him was full of military sound and fury just prior to Geneva. There was much talk of involvement, even though Indochina would have been in every sense a nibbling war.
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> The terrain of the Indochinese conflict—the flooded deltas, the thousands of scattered villages, the jungles—is made to order for the nibbling of mechanized forces. The French have been nibbled and chewed for eight years. . . .
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> A people, whether in Asia or in the Americas, can preserve their independence only if they have it in the first place and if they are willing to fight to keep it. Beyond this initial responsibility, which every nation must accept, nations can combine among themselves for a joint defense of freedom. . . . But from the beginning to the end of this process of defense, the key factor is the determination of the people of each nation to defend their freedom.

Senator Mansfield proposed that the United States favor any government in Asia which represented its people and was responsive to their needs, but that we should stay out of their internal affairs. He argued that any military alliances must draw their primary strength from the Asian nations themselves, and that American involvement, if any, should be indirect. And he insisted that the United Nations should serve as "the only worldwide marshalling center for resistance, in the event of aggression or threat of aggression in Asia." Senator John Sherman Cooper suggested that Mansfield wanted it both ways, to protect Southeast Asia from communism without engaging U.S. troops. Asked whether he favored intervention in Indochina, Mansfield responded bluntly: "No, I was never in favor of intervention, and I am opposed to it now. I think that it would be suicidal. I believe the worst thing that could happen to the United States would be to have our forces intervene in Indochina and then bog down in the jungles there." Sadly, as we know, his worst fears were to materialize a decade later.[2]

Like Senator John F. Kennedy and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, Senator Mansfield met, and came to admire, the Vietnamese Nationalist Ngo Dinh Diem during the early 1950's while Diem lived in exile in a Catholic convent in the United States. After South Vietnam became an independent nation, Diem returned as its president, and Mansfield became one of his strongest supporters. Mansfield recognized Diem's limitations. He was cool and aloof from his people, by no means a charismatic leader. He could be rigid and dogmatic and relied excessively upon his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, whose tactics verged on the despotic. But Mansfield also insisted that if South Vietnam was going to survive as an independent nation, it must do so under its own leadership, and Diem provided the only hope. This was the whole thrust of his belief in the self-determination of nations. Mansfield defended Diem against criticism from both the French and the State Department, which periodically signaled its own suspicions, but he insisted that Diem was never "our boy."

When Diem was overthrown in a coup in November 1963—a coup which the United States may have sparked and certainly did nothing to prevent—Mansfield rose in the Senate to regret that "a government which began with so much promise, in the end crumpled in a military coup and violent death." He called upon the Kennedy administration to reevaluate America's role in Southeast Asia and to begin a reduction in the commitment of U.S. forces in Vietnam. Within just a few weeks, however, the Kennedy administration itself ended with a violent and tragic death, and a new administration under Lyndon B. Johnson was in office.[3]

On one hand, Mansfield might have hoped to influence the Johnson administration's policies towards Vietnam. President Johnson had had little experience in foreign policy and, with the exception of one whirlwind tour of Southeast Asia in 1961, he had little background in the conflict in Vietnam. He was not necessarily bound to the policies of his predecessor. While he was Majority Leader in 1959, Johnson had picked Mansfield as his whip and seemed to respect his advice on foreign policy. Johnson in those days had also been in the habit of calling Senator J. William Fulbright "my secretary of state," and Fulbright shared much of Mansfield's skepticism about the Vietnam situation. But, once in the White House, rather than turning to his old congressional colleagues for advice, Johnson, who also recalled the "Who Lost China?" debate, was determined that he should not appear weak, and that an American ally should not fall to communist expansion during his presidency. He thus ignored Mike Mansfield's call for self-determination and respect for the nationalist movements in both North and South Vietnam. Sadly, Lyndon Johnson came to picture the conflict as just another outbreak of the great global clash between communism and democracy.

Although Mansfield disagreed strongly with Johnson's policies and regularly sent memoranda to the White House suggesting alternatives to escalation of the war, in public he stood loyally by his president. As the Democratic Majority Leader, Mansfield believed it was his institutional role to defend the programs of the Democratic administration, no matter what his personal feelings. He supported the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in August 1964 and each successive increase in troops to Vietnam. As the Senate and the nation began to divide into hawks and doves, Mansfield resisted the urge to join the doves and, instead, defended his president. When Mansfield's close friend and breakfast companion, George Aiken, rose to condemn President Johnson's policies, Mansfield rose in rebuttal:

I think I probably know Lyndon Johnson as well as any other member of this body knows him. I have been closely associated with him for 24 years. I know how deeply concerned he is about Vietnam. I know the agonizing days and nights he goes through. I know of his intense desire to bring this most difficult of all situations which has ever faced an American President to some sort of honorable conclusion. . . .

So far as the Senator from Montana is concerned, he will do his very best to give the President of the United States as much in the way of support as he possibly can.[4]

At the same time he offered the president his support, Senator Mansfield worked hard for peace in Vietnam. He felt dismayed over the situation in South Vietnam, where coup followed coup until it was difficult to tell who was in charge, and where American military forces were increasingly taking over the war. At the beginning of 1965, Americans were suffering five casualties a week in Vietnam. By the end of 1965, the number of killed and wounded had risen to five hundred a week. The annual cost of the war had risen from $1 billion to $13 billion. The field of battle had spread from South Vietnam to North Vietnam, with the bombing of North Vietnam by U.S. forces, to Laos, and eventually to Cambodia. "Is Vietnam, both north and south, to be reduced to a charnel house amidst smoking, silent ruins?" he asked. Seeing the issue in larger geopolitical terms, he suggested that peace in Southeast Asia was inseparable from peace with China. "What is needed most, at this time and in the light of the danger, is an initiative for a direct contact between the Peking government and our own government on the problem of peace in Vietnam." He delivered these remarks at a commencement in June 1966, five years before Richard Nixon, as president, would achieve a breakthrough in relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China.[5]

During the last two years of the Johnson administration, as the Vietnam war intensified, Mansfield continued to pursue these themes. He called for a face-to-face meeting between Secretary of State Dean Rusk and the Chinese foreign minister. He proposed a halt to the aerial bombardment of North Vietnam and a concentration on sealing off the borders of South Vietnam. He called for a reconvening of the Geneva Conference on Southeast Asia and for an all-Asian conference on the war. He called on the administration to give closer consideration to French proposals for the neutralization of Southeast Asia. He suggested that the United Nations play a role in ending the war. "The conflict in Vietnam cannot be settled from the Congress or from the campus," he said in a

Mike Mansfield called for direct contact between Peking and Washington in the 1960's.
Martin Luther King Library.

speech at the University of North Carolina in 1967. "In a government such as ours, a Senator lives with a Constitution, a constituency and a conscience." Only the president, however, could make the fundamental decisions of war and peace. "These decisions are of an immensity which enjoins upon us all a high respect for the burdens which a President must bear, and a responsibility to tender to him every support which can be given in good conscience." [6]

By 1967, all the optimistic predictions of an early end to the war and "bringing the boys home by Christmas" had passed as just so many fantasies. "The fact is that the war bewilders," said Senator Mansfield. The statistics were benumbing. The costs in human life and dollars were staggering. "Eight weeks of military expenses in Vietnam equal all of the Federal monies sought for education," he pointed out, ". . . and the special funds for improving education in city slums and depressed rural areas." By mid-1967, over ten thousand Americans had died in the war (an appalling statistic then, before we knew that fifty thousand names would one day be inscribed on a wall in Washington).

By February 1968, the Tet Offensive had taken place and events in Vietnam had deteriorated even further. In remarks at Indiana University, Senator Mansfield described the struggle in Vietnam as "grim, pitiful and devastating." He said that the question "Who's winning in Vietnam?" was offensive, as if the war were an athletic contest. "Vietnam is not a game. There can be no winners; there are only losers, and the longer the war persists the greater are the losses of all concerned." In his most critical statement on the conduct of the war, Mansfield concluded with these observations:

> There is no obligation to continue to pour out the blood and resources of this nation until South Vietnam is made safe for one Vietnamese faction or another. On the contrary there is an obligation to the people of the United States to conserve that blood and those resources; and, to the people of Vietnam there is an obligation to avoid the destruction of their land and society even in the name of saving them.[7]

Five weeks later, President Johnson announced that he would not stand for reelection but would devote his complete attention instead to achieving a negotiated peace in Vietnam.

In March, Mansfield delivered the first lecture sponsored by the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Endowment at the University of Montana. Vietnam was still the great issue, but he wanted to go beyond Vietnam to reiterate his belief that the crisis in Asia could not be settled without rapprochement with China. "Like it or not, the present Chinese government is here to stay," he observed. "Like it or not, China is a major power in Asia and is on the way to becoming a nuclear power." It was, therefore, in America's best interest to put aside its efforts to isolate China.[8]

The 1968 election of Richard Nixon, who promised a secret plan to end the war and who, as president, advocated "Vietnamization" of the war, seemed to hold promise of an honorable end to the terrible conflict, but Senator Mansfield was soon horrified to see the president expanding the war into neighboring Laos and Cambodia. Freed from the constraints of speaking for a president from his own party, Mansfield took to the Senate floor to wave a warning flag against a deepening conflict. "The danger of our overextended commitment in Southeast Asia needs to be considered frankly and without delay." [9]

The war caused Senator Mansfield to reevaluate his position on the president's handling of foreign affairs. "For many years, we have seen our role in matters of war and

Despite President Nixon's "Vietnamization" of the war, the conflict escalated. During debates on the Vietnam War, Nixon met with congressional leaders, *left to right,* Gerald Ford, Carl Albert, Robert Griffin, Robert C. Byrd, and Hugh Scott. *Office of Senator Robert C. Byrd*

peace largely as one of acquiescence in the acts of the executive branch," he said to the Senate in 1970. "If we have had doubts, we have swallowed them. . . . We have gone along. We have rocked few boats." But that time had passed, and too much blood had been spilled. He insisted that the Senate exert its responsibility "to curb the further expansion of the war." [10]

In 1972, as the final negotiations for withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam took place, the Nixon administration made the grand gesture towards China that Senator Mansfield had been advocating for years. It was appropriate that, after the president's historic visit to Peking, the first official congressional delegation to China would consist of Senator Mike Mansfield and Republican Leader Hugh Scott. Opening the door to China, he pointed out, undermined much of our rationale for being in Vietnam:

> It seems to me high time to ask why we are using the most advanced machines of destruction in that primitive land. Are we doing so out of force of habit? Out of fear? Fear of what? The fact is that we are still engaged in a war which, to put the best face on it, was sanctioned by what has now become a discredited policy towards China. The President's visit to China had the symbolic effect of marking the end of that policy. If the old China policy is no longer valid, is not the present involvement in the Vietnam war which derived from that policy also invalid? [11]

In the end, as the last American troops were withdrawn, Senator Mansfield proclaimed the Vietnam War "not a comedy of errors, but a tragedy of errors for this nation, with 55,000 dead, with 305,000 casualties; with something on the order of $130 billion spent so far; with three times as many bombs being used, in tonnage, as was the case in all of the Second World War and Korea; with the tactics of defoliation and craterization of

Considering their longstanding concern over United States-Asian relations, it was appropriate that Majority Leader Mike Mansfield and Minority Leader Hugh Scott were selected for the first official congressional delegation to the People's Republic of China in 1972. *U.S. Senate Historical Office*

Indochina; with the difficulties it has caused us at home." He called on the nation to "put Indochina behind us, wipe the slate clean, and start out to bind up some of the wounds and take care of some of our own concerns."[12]

The independent nation of South Vietnam lasted only two years after the withdrawal of American troops and collapsed in the spring of 1975. On April 30 of the same year, the last Americans were helicoptered out of Saigon. President Gerald Ford called for Americans to close ranks and avoid recriminations. Senator Mansfield seconded that sentiment, pointing out that U.S. involvement in the war had ended when it did, averting even greater casualties,

> because Congress was unwilling to give the executive branch a blank check in providing the closeout funds. Congress insisted not only on the withdrawal of American personnel but on the speedup of that withdrawal as a precondition of further appropriations. Working with the Congress, . . . the President moved the executive branch to proceed on that basis. . . .

Drawing a lesson from this experience, Senator Mansfield stressed

> the importance of the closest collaboration between the President and the Congress. It was the decisive factor in this situation. . . . In moments of crisis, at least, the President and the Congress cannot be adversaries; they must be allies who, together, must delineate the path to guide the nation's massive machinery of government in a fashion which serves the interests of the people and is acceptable to the people. [13]

Mr. President, this was one of the most significant episodes in our country's history. I have repeated Senator Mansfield's words here because I believe they are still meaningful, still worth taking the time to read and to contemplate. As we toil in the post-Vietnam era and struggle to interpret the legacy of that ill-fated war, we have much to learn from the words of our prophets—a title for which Mike Mansfield is amply qualified.